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THE OPPENHEIMER CASE: Security on Trial. *By Philip M. Stern with the collaboration of Harold P. Green. Harper & Row. 591 pp. $10.*

THE GREAT WEAPONS HERESY. *By Thomas W. Wilson, Jr. Houghton Mifflin Co. 275 pp. $5.95.*

THE SWIFT YEARS: The Robert Oppenheimer Story. *By Peter Michelmore. Dodd, Mead & Co. 273 pp. $6.95.*

ALLEN WEINSTEIN

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An unfriendly security officer wrote in 1943 that J. Robert Oppenheimer was "deeply concerned with gaining a worldwide reputation as a scientist, and a place in history." Certainly no other modern scientist has received as much attention from historians and journalists. During the past two decades, Oppenheimer has been the subject of a dozen assorted books, including even a mediocre novel and a stilted, but successful, documentary play. What distinguished Oppenheimer among scientists was not his fusion of separate careers as physicist, administrator and government adviser. Rather, he achieved notoriety because of the sudden disruption of that career in 1953, when an Atomic Energy Commission loyalty board voted to deny him further security clearance. After his security hearing, Oppenheimer became a hero to liberal Americans and remained one until his death in 1967.

Prior to his hearing, Oppenheimer had been a brilliant theoretical physicist at Berkeley, director of the Los Alamos atomic bomb project, chairman of the AEC's General Advisory Committee of scientists, and director of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. These achievements had assured his "worldwide reputation"; but, ironically, only the shabby treatment he received from the AEC's loyalty review board brought Oppenheimer, overnight, a distinct "place in history."

His previous public image as the Promethean "Father of the Atomic Bomb" was superseded after 1953 by a more compassionate view of the man as a harrowed Galileo, hounded from public life for youthful radicalism and dissenting opinions on military strategy. This later attitude toward Oppenheimer characterizes three recent books by Philip M. Stern, Thomas W. Wilson, Jr., and Peter Michelmore. They differ greatly in quality and offer different kinds of insights, but they overlap sufficiently to provide a cumulative portrait of Oppenheimer's unique place among scientists of his generation.

Stern's book, undoubtedly the best of the three, is a masterful examination of the factors that led to Oppenheimer's fall from governmental grace. The scientist had become a center of controversy among Washington officials during the Truman years while serving as chairman of the AEC's General Advisory Committee and also as a member of various government boards concerned with developing the military uses of nuclear energy. During these years, he earned the animosity of Adm. Lewis Strauss, Eisenhower's choice as AEC chairman, after having ridiculed Strauss's opinions before a Congressional committee. At the same time, Edward Teller and other leading advocates of the hydrogen bomb project blamed Oppenheimer for having originally opposed a crash program to produce the "superbomb" and considered him still hostile toward their work. The Strategic Air Command's "Big Bomb" tacticians also questioned the scientist's judgment for having favored an improved continental defense system and small atomic weapons development, presumably at the cost of reducing the SAC's central military function.

The simmering brew of personal and doctrinal antagonisms toward Oppenheimer bubbled over in 1953 when a former Air Force security officer named William Liscum Borden charged him with having been a Soviet espionage agent for the previous fourteen years. Borden's "evidence" for this astonishing assertion consisted mainly of references to Oppenheimer's more controversial opinions on strategic questions—particularly his initial opposition to the H-bomb program—along with a catalogue of previously known facts concerning the scientist's earlier associations with Berkeley Communists. This security file had been reviewed thoroughly and discounted by Gen. Leslie Groves at Los Alamos and by both the FBI and the AEC, following the war. On most occasions from the beginning of his involvement with secret government work, Oppenheimer had been thoroughly cooperative with security investigators, not only supplying material concerning information on other atomic scientists—friends, associates and students—whom he considered potential "security risks."

Oppenheimer had been cleared for top security purposes time after time from 1943 to 1953. After being informed of Borden's accusatory letter, however, President Eisenhower ordered a "blank wall" placed between the "Father of the Atomic Bomb" and all atomic security information pending an AEC hearing of the charges. The panel voted 2 to 1 to deny him a security clearance, a judgment that the full Atomic Energy Commission sanctioned by a 4 to 1 ballot. From 1953 to his death, J. Robert Oppenheimer had no further access to restricted materials on atomic energy, and rarely did he serve in any official capacity as a government consultant.

By transcribing the sorry record of Oppenheimer's hearing, Philip Stern exposes the grave abuse of individual rights perpetrated by the government's loyalty-security program upon thousands of similarly honorable public servants since the program's inception in 1947. Stern, in a concluding chapter, makes an impassioned and persuasive case for the system's complete elimination, not only because of its undemocratic procedures but because it has failed to uncover almost any real "security risks," even by its own expansive definitions of that term. Of the nearly 5 million federal employees screened under the Truman administration's loyalty program from 1947 to 1952, only 560 or one-hundredth of 1 per cent were "removed or denied Federal employment on grounds relating to loyalty." Since 1952, an even smaller number of "disloyal" employees has been exposed. Yet to sustain this futile spy hunt, the federal government alone has spent (according to Stern) "between one-half and three-quarters of a *billion* dollars" in the past two decades.

Nothing enhanced Robert Oppenheimer's career as a government adviser as much as the behavior of those who destroyed it. In the name of protecting "secrets," many of which had been developed by Oppenheimer himself, the AEC's security panel conducted one of the most unfair semi-judicial proceedings in recent American history. The reader may examine for himself the full measure of its improprieties in *The Oppenheimer Case*. The Eisenhower administration succeeded, of course, in discrediting Oppenheimer as a government policy maker. But, in the

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